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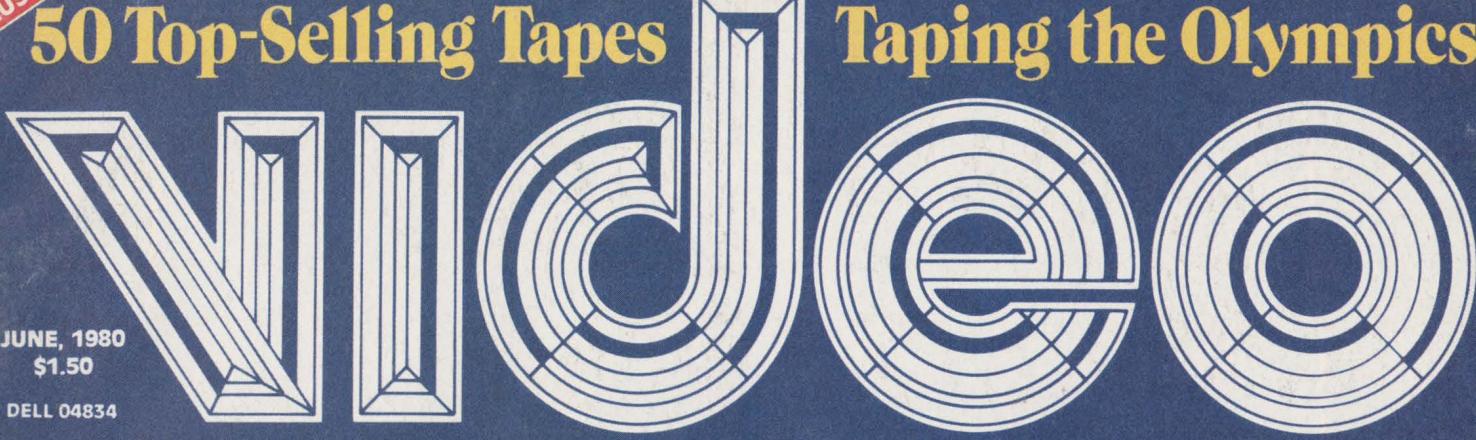
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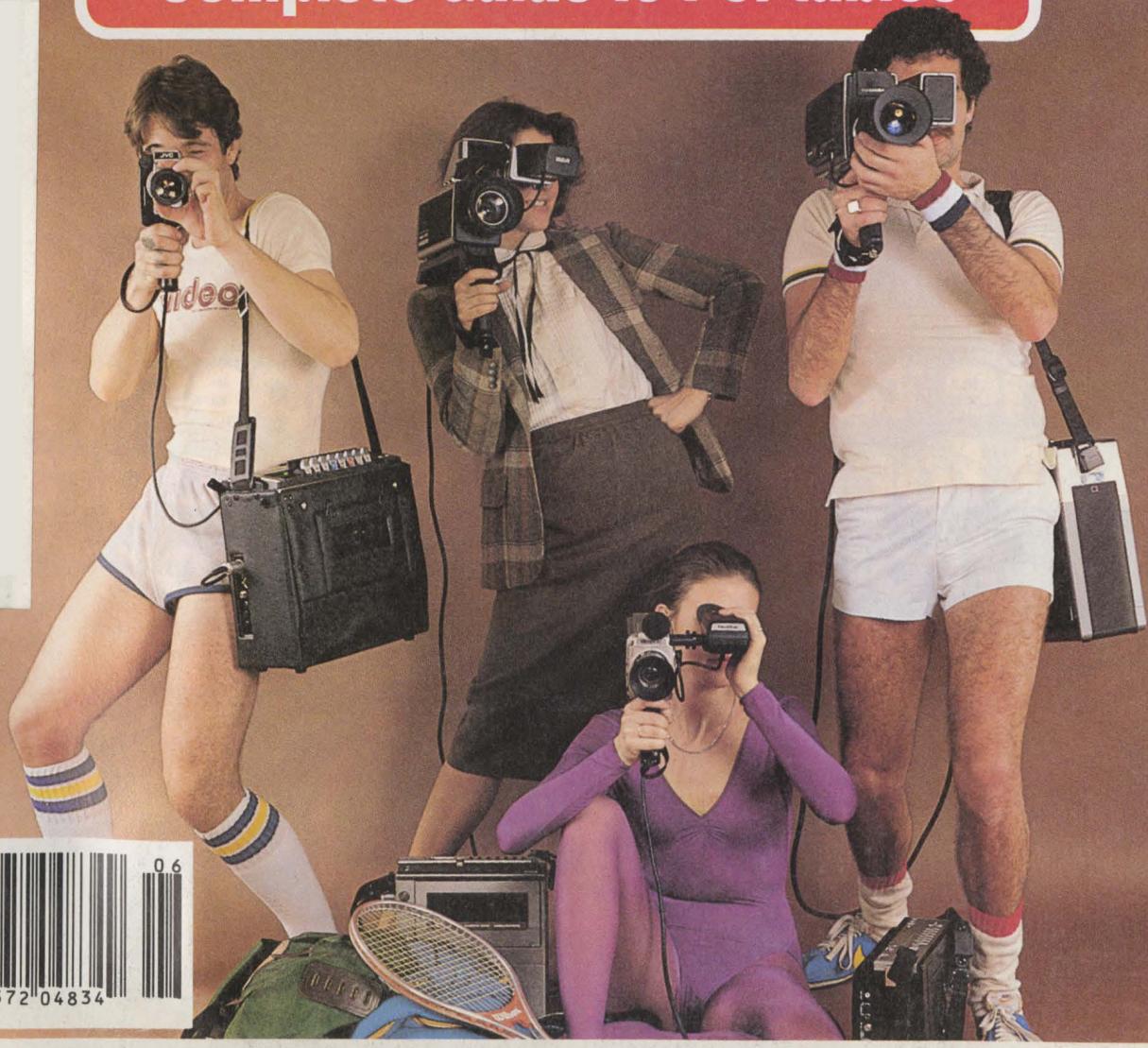
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ABOUT OUR COVER
Portable videocassette recorders are shaping up with a new sleeker profile, lighter weight, and more rugged yet easier to use features & design. Summer's a great time to get in the swing of videotaping. Photography by Will Nardelli & Harvey Hersh.

4 Video

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Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

What's In A Name?

The Imagination Machine

It's sadly ironic—and sadly true—that the Imagination Machine by APF Electronics suffers from a certain lack of imagination by the company's game design staff. The system, which packs the power of a mini-computer, appears to have a world of arcade gaming possibilities, but the available programs hardly exploit them to the fullest.

The Imagination Machine is a creditable attempt to provide novices with an easy-to-use introductory level small computer. The machine is well-designed and sturdily constructed to withstand heavy use over a long period of time. The individual components can be speedily assembled, an advantage for those who like to pack the machine away in a closet between sessions. Best of all, it's simple enough to work; even beginners will be writing short computer programs in no time.

But the APF Imagination Machine falls well short of the mark as a programmable player of home arcade games. Those who desire a computer with some gaming capability may find APF fills the bill, but those who want a high-level home arcade would do better to look elsewhere.

The design of the APF controllers presents problems while playing. They are joysticks but have a very short shaft, topped by a doorknob-sized ball. Players can't exert very much leverage due to the short barrel, making it nearly impossible to execute precise movements during games.

The pair of controllers we tested proved mechanically stiff and electronically unresponsive. It's hard to have fun with an arcade game when the players can't make the controllers faithfully execute their instructions.

APF should consider switching to one of the excellent joystick controllers developed by manufacturers of other programmable game units. Or since most of the APF games would work just as well with paddles, using that type controller might improve the situation. As things stand, making the controllers perform effectively

Bill Kunkel is a New York-based writer and veteran video game addict. He shares his mania with Frank Laney, another New York freelancer.

is at least as challenging as the games themselves. (The APF controllers also feature calculator-style keypads, but they are apparently only used for prepared instructional programs available on cassette.)

The graphics are remarkably poor, decidedly inferior to home arcades that lack the computing muscle of the Imagination Machine. Although the games do boast on-screen scoring—a feature that has become standard for home arcades—the numbers and words are small and hard to read. The design of the unit's alphanumeric characters doesn't make the task any simpler.

APF's designers have evidently paid little attention to the visual presentation of the games themselves. This system may disappoint those who like a spaceship to really look like a spaceship. Anyone who has learned BASIC could do almost as well as APF's staff with a little practice.

The graphics are inferior to arcades that lack the computing muscle of the APF machine

The sketchy graphics of software offered for the Imagination Machine may well have the effect of encouraging first-time programmers to try and out-do the company's efforts, but it doesn't seem quite fair.

In fact, it raises the thorny question of what a buyer should expect from prepared programs. We believe cartridges should feature professional caliber design work. They should provide purchasers with thoroughly playable games, complete with polished visuals, that are beyond the ability of all but the most experienced and sophisticated programmers to create.

Space Patrol, the game built into the computer, is a fair example of the limitations of the APF system from the arcade addict's viewpoint. It allows a player to fire

projectiles from a stationary position near the lower boundary of the playfield as pairs of spaceships move horizontally across the screen. Although the computer speeds up the target ships during the course of play, the game doesn't have enough variables to wear well. Once the elementary timing is mastered—one or two rounds is sufficient—Space Patrol becomes as exciting and challenging as shooting fish in a barrel.

As with other APF cartridges we tested, the two-player version of Space Patrol is less than satisfactory. Both players' launching sites are on the screen simultaneously, but each participant must complete an entire game before the other gets a turn. There doesn't seem to be any major difference between this supposed two-player variation and alternating on the one-player version.

The separately available cartridges aren't quite as simplistic, but they aren't much higher in quality, either. Let's look at a couple of the better ones:

Brickdown/Shooting Match

Brickdown is the classic in which players try to smash through a multi-layered brick wall, scoring points for each brick removed. APF's version is a little different from the others, in that the wall of bricks is vertical instead of horizontal. The strategy remains the same. As with all games of this type, the key to clearing the field of bricks is to break a narrow channel through the wall to the empty space between the back of the wall and edge of the playfield. The longer the ball remains trapped back there, the more points you'll get.

In **Shooting Match** players fire stationary cannons from the bottom of the screen at a white square moving back and forth horizontally. The computer reduces the target by half and speeds it up every time the shooter scores a hit. Though both guns are on the screen, Shooting Match is difficult to play head-to-head, because every time one marksman fires, it freezes the action on the other's side of the field. It's too predictable to be anything but boring.

Baseball

This cartridge suffers from serious design flaws. The poor layout of the diamond puts more than half the screen out of play in foul territory, forcing APF to use on-screen ballplayers tiny enough to strain even the sharpest pair of eyes.

There's no individual positioning of fielders, no base-stealing, no advancing a runner with a sacrifice fly—in short, few of the elements that have made video baseball games so popular with home arcaders.

Next issue we'll be taking the first look at what some feel is the biggest breakthrough in the history of home video arcades—Mattel's Intellivision.